

## **God's Work in Progress**

**Philippians 1:1-11 & 2:12-13**

**Isaiah 43:16-21**

This fall I'm returning to a little book of the Bible that I began my ministry here with 7 years ago (to the day!): Philippians. I love this short letter of the apostle Paul, and to me it contains all of the essential and relevant material for living the Christian life in a world that is in turmoil. And, keeping our hearts and minds grounded and steady while the world is in turmoil!

This series will take us through Thanksgiving Sunday and up to the first Sunday of Advent. We won't look at every passage from this little epistle, but the main themes. It's short, but packed with some of the most brilliant and beloved teaching about the Way of Jesus, and solid encouragement for us in our journey of faith.

Brief background, before we dive in: the city of Philippi was established as a Roman military colony; it is described in Acts 16:11 as a "leading city in the district of Macedonia" and it was in a strategic location along a Macedonian highway that connected Rome with Asia Minor and other eastern locations.

So, it was part of strategic trade route as well as being a strategic military outpost.

The Philippian church was founded by the Apostle Paul on one of his missionary journeys, which you can read about also in Acts 16:11-40. And as we can tell from the tone of the letter, right from the start, the apostle had great affection for these people, and they for him. There is a warm tone.

This letter to the Philippians is also one of the apostle Paul's last letters, if not his last, which he wrote from prison. So there is, to my observation, a maturity and a wisdom here that comes from having stayed close to Christ through the joys *and* the sufferings of following the Way of Christ over many years. What's remarkable to me is that there is no quiet resignation in this letter, or loud protestation, now that Paul is at the end of his life. He rather exhibits a joy and an energy to live for Christ as long as he remains alive. "For me to live is Christ, to die is gain" he will say toward the beginning of the letter. Either way, God be praised. I can't lose. My life has purpose as long as I'm alive. And if I die, well, that would be a benefit.

Eugene Peterson calls this letter Paul's happiest letter, and it has been called Paul's epistle of joy (hence the bulletin cover) because he speaks of joy and rejoicing more often in this little letter than he does in all his other letters. The fact that it's called Paul's epistle of joy is remarkable, given all that he has been through in his life, and is experiencing toward the end of his life when he writes this: namely, that he's in prison, he is materially poor, and he is in poor health as we learn from his other prison letters. What's remarkable is that there is no complaining from Paul about how awful things are—for him personally, or about what's going on in the world. And there was plenty to complain about on both fronts!

There is also no sense of quiet desperation or resignation on his part—a kind of phoning it in (“Oh well, what can we do?”). Here, in one of Paul's last letters, he is just as caring, just as positive and joyful, just as engaged in the work of God as he was when he was called to be an apostle for the risen Christ.

### **Philippians 1:1-11**

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the

first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.

It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because I hold you in my heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus.

And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

What a rich and beautiful opening to this letter, with expressions of affection and partnership, joy and confidence. It sets such a great tone for the rest of the letter and I'll be coming back to this from time to time in this series because this joyfulness and confidence really is the golden thread that runs through this letter.

Golfing with Ron. This was a time, years ago, when I was refreshing my game, reading a couple books, watching videos. I learned that part of the mental aspect of the game is to think positive. And visualize a good outcome. For example, Jack Nicklaus, when lining up for a putt, would tell himself: this is going in the cup. So, Ron and I are out on the course one day and in one of our rounds, he's lining up a putt, and muttering that he'll never be able to make it, or get it

close. I said: Ron, think positive! He said, “Ok, I’m *positive* I can’t make this putt.”

This is not the kind of positive that Paul is expressing here! You know, ‘I’m positive that things are terrible and they’re probably going to get worse.’ That’s the gospel according to Eeyore. Paul, rather, is expressing his *conviction*, not just an intellectual belief because he signed off on some doctrinal statement, but he is expressing a heartfelt *conviction* that God is up to good. You know how we talk about someone being “up to *no good*”? This is the opposite: God is *up to good*.

He begins with this amazing affirmation: I am confident that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion. Paul doesn’t hedge here. He doesn’t say, “Gee it would be great if God would bless you and work his purposes out through you...” He doesn’t say, “I wonder if God will do something good; let’s pray about it.” He says, “I am **confident**...” that the One who began a good work will continue that good work until it’s complete.

Now, an important footnote here: This passage is often used as an individual encouragement. The One who began a good work “in you” (in your life) will continue that work and bring it to completion. That’s great, and appropriate. However, the “you” here in Greek is plural. You all. Our chair Bible

NRSV gets it right: “The one who began a good work *among* you...” “...in your community of faith; in your church” will continue that work.

What is that good work that God began, that Paul is talking about? He doesn't say what it is, specifically, so it's likely that Paul is simply making a general statement about God being at work in the lives of the followers of Christ, and also in their service and mission to the world around them. I think that becomes clear as the letter goes on.

So, the encouragement right from the start is the confident reminder that God is at work, and continues to be at work, and will be working into the future.

Now, this letter to the Philippians *is* full of encouragement from beginning to end, yet when we read carefully between the lines one can detect that something was going on in the Philippian church that was creating a sense of *discouragement*—or fear or anxiety (we get strong hints of that especially in chapter 4 when he says “be anxious for nothing... pray about everything”). I'm sure that's why Paul begins the letter this way—he wants to set an encouraging tone.

We don't know specifically what was going on. But likely there was something **external** to them, perhaps opposition they may have been facing, or even the beginnings of persecution. Or perhaps it was economic recession.

Philippi was located on a trade route, so perhaps commerce had changed in some way. It could be that this little congregation was hit hard economically; there is a hint of that at the end of the letter. Maybe the population of Philippi was changing—it certainly would have been changing socio-economically, but perhaps it was also changing in other ways, again, because of their location.

So it could've been something *external* that was going on.

There was also likely something **internal** going on in the church, like a personality conflict. Or two. Or three. You know, Jesus said wherever two or three are gathered in his name... a disagreement is likely to arise over what we're supposed to do in Jesus' name! (Jesus didn't really say that, but that's what sometimes happens!) It could've been a squabble over mission priorities or money. Perhaps they were arguing about the color of the carpet they were going to put into the Philippian church social hall. We get clues in the letter that there was disagreement over *something*.

So there are possible *external* circumstances, or *internal*, or probably **both**, that created a need for Paul to bring encouragement to this church that was facing challenge and change, which resulted in them feeling anxious or concerned.

Speaking of change and challenge...

As I often say, and will say again, all churches in America today can relate to this—external challenges, and internal challenges. *There is no such thing as a church that is not in transition right now* (repeat)—whether the pastor has been there for many years, or whether they're in between pastors. Whether the church is relatively new, or has a long history. Whether the church is small, medium size, or large. Whether the church is Presbyterian or Methodist or evangelical or liberal, or Catholic or non-denominational. Transition and challenge is the name of the game today. It's the new normal because of the massive culture shift we are living through, right where we are in our towns and cities and around the world.

And btw this is true of all institutions and not just the church. Transition is happening in education, in our health care system, and we see this being played out on a daily basis in politics and some of our other long-standing institutions (such as fraternal organizations and the like). Someone has called this a cultural tsunami. The ground is shifting under our feet and it's causing tidal waves of change.

And the good news is, as we read and study the Bible and history, is that the world was in the midst of culture shift in the first century as well, when the New Testament was being written.

Which is why I love this letter to the Philippians. Because Paul wanted to encourage them with this letter, and through them encourage us—and make it abundantly clear that although transition is the new normal, and we live in a changed and changing world, God is still at work, God is always good, and faithful, and we need more than ever to abide in Jesus Christ, and remember who we are, and whose we are, and who is really at work among us. Because...

The key word in verse 6 is “**God**” (literally, “the one”).... **The One (God)**, who began a good work among you, will bring it to completion. He doesn’t say, “*I*, the apostle Paul, who began a good work among you will continue it”—even though he founded the church. He doesn’t say “**you** who began a good work—now work harder to complete it.”

The reminder here is that it’s **God**, who began a good work who will continue it and ultimately fulfill it. And he reiterates this in chapter 2:13: “*Work out the gift of salvation... for it is **God** who is at work in you, enabling you to will and to work for his good pleasure.*”

We’re reminded once again that the work of renewal in the church and the work of ongoing ministry is God’s work, not ours.

This reminds me of a passage in Mark’s gospel—4:26-28:

26 Jesus said, ‘The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, <sup>27</sup>and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed

would sprout and grow, he does not know how. <sup>28</sup>The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain.'

Jesus is teaching here that the word of God and the Spirit of God have their own powerful effect, and the Kingdom of God grows of its own accord. We do the simple work of sowing seeds, doing good and 'tending the garden' so to speak, and then trust the Spirit of God to make it fruitful.

This is good news because it means that our work, if you will, is simply to abide in Christ, follow his Way, worship, pray, and listen—*and do that together* (that's part of Paul's encouragement in chapter 2, which we'll talk about next week), and then affirm the good work that God is doing. And as part of that, we do the next right thing right in front of us, and let God's Spirit make it all fruitful.

Obviously, this requires wisdom and spiritual discernment, and patience. *God is never in a hurry.* The only real mistake we can make is to run ahead of God and try to do things on our own steam. That's what anxiety will do to us (cause us to run ahead of God and try to 'fix' things). We'll talk about that when we get to chapter 4 ("be anxious for nothing..."). We actually need to do the counterintuitive thing and slow ourselves down and listen, pray, converse, and seek wisdom. Which leads to the next part of Paul's encouragement, in his prayer for them.

Following the confident assertion that God is at work, and will continue that work, Paul prays that their love would overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight.

With the assurance that God is at work, even if we aren't always 100% clear what that work is at the moment, there is something we *can* do: we can love intelligently and wisely, and in a way that blesses others, with small but substantial acts of love.

Every time Jesus talks about the good work that we are invited to do, he always uses examples of small things: a mustard seed, a grain of wheat, a little bit of salt, a small amount of yeast mixed in with dough. These are all small, but substantial, because God causes them to grow and multiply, and, because they are done in love. Mother Teresa: "We can't all do great things, but we can do small things with great love."

So, please don't talk yourself out of being able to make a difference because you feel like you can't do something bigger. Every act of love counts. Every good work counts. Because God is at work through you.

As in other places where we are told to love, Paul is describing love, not just as affection, but as behavior. Not primarily as feeling, but as wisdom. As a

decision and action that will produce a good result for the glory and praise of God, and the benefit of others.

As God continues his work among us *in here*, that work prepares us for serving others *out there*: where we live and where we work, where we shop and where we socialize and exercise. Where we go to school as teachers and as students.

We are a world in transition—and have been for decades; it's just accelerated. And in the midst of this transition, people are hurting and in need of hope. Faith, hope and love, really. And joy! One of the gifts God's people can give the world, in addition to our overflowing love, is our joy, and our peace and contentment—as much as we are able to access joy and peace and choose that for ourselves. We help no one when we're wringing our hands, or grumpy and negative and critical. Joy opens the door to the Holy Spirit's gifts and work.

These are challenging times in which we live. It's not easy! But possibility and potential are before us. Because God is at work! Even if it's underground, or on the margins for a time—hidden from our sight, like seeds waiting to germinate, or roots spreading. Like yeast in dough. We are invited to trust, and have faith, and act on the conviction that God hasn't given up on the world. Or on any person.

And we must remember that there isn't anything God hasn't seen before, there is nothing God hasn't handled before. God is the God of history. Nothing surprises God or freaks God out. God has seen some pretty messed up stuff over the centuries! So we can rest confidently in the fact that God is at work, even if, perhaps, in a new way for a new day—as he said through Isaiah: “former things have passed; new things I declare to you! I will make a way in the desert, and springs in the wilderness.” God will make a way in this deserty, wilderness time.

In the Bulb There is a Flower—a resurrection song, speaking of hope and possibility, and trust, while God continues his good work, even if it's hidden from our sight for a time.